



Giving it back: From oral folktales to illustrated bilingual reading books for minority languages

Alexander R. Coupe,¹ Joan M. Kelly,¹
Peh Yang Yu,¹ Lesley Tang,¹ T. Temsunungsang²

¹Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

²English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong, India

Acknowledgements

This project gratefully acknowledges the support of a Singapore Government Ministry of Education Tier-2 grant MOE (MOE2012-T2-1-100) *Exploring the crossroads of linguistic diversity: Language contact in Southeast Asia*.

The team

Story tellers: Mr Rongsenlemba Jamir and Mr Kikemsengba Imchen of Mangmetong Village, Mokokchung District.

Art facilitator and artists

Joan M. Kelly (jmkelly@ntu.edu.sg)

Peh Yang Yu (PEHY0008@e.ntu.edu.sg)

Lesley Tang (lesley.l.tang@gmail.com)

Linguists

Alexander R. Coupe (arcoupe@ntu.edu.sg)

T. Temsunungsang (ttjamir@gmail.com)

Overview of project

This paper describes a collaborative project between artists and linguists that involved:

- modifying the prose of two previously recorded narratives to render them suitable as reading books
- developing a practical orthography
- creating appropriate illustrations to accompany the folk tales
- testing the orthography on native speakers
- negotiating with the Ao community about introducing a new orthography for a minority dialect (on-going)

Motivation

To return a tangible output of academic linguistic research to a speech community in the form of bilingual reading books.

Traditional folk tales:

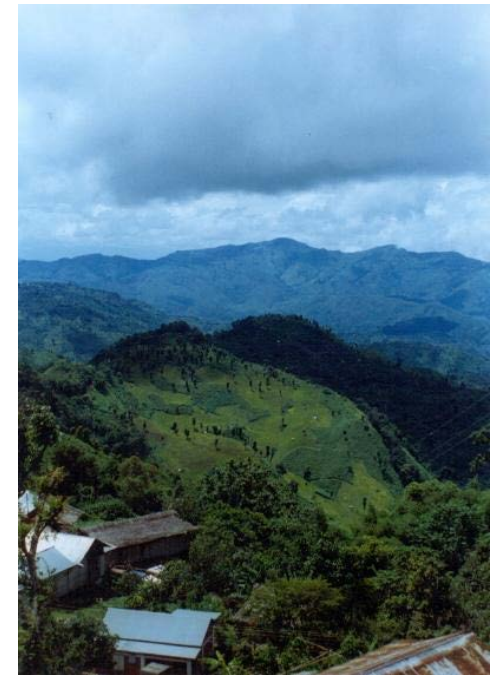
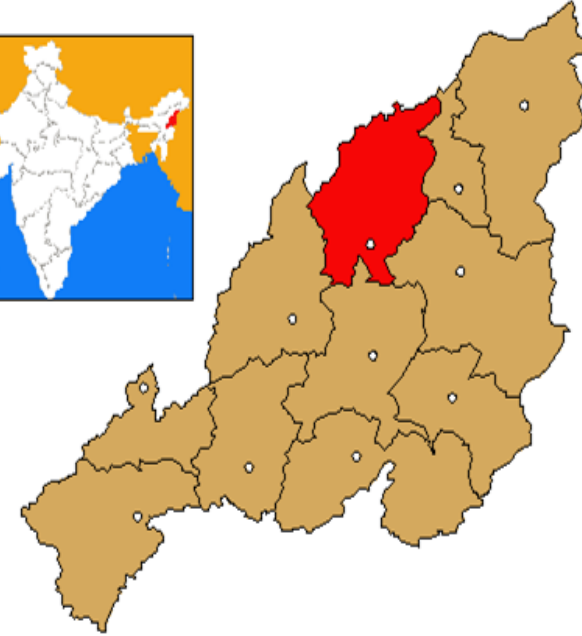
- are ideal because they are culturally-significant and relevant to the world of Ao speakers
- can serve as a vehicle for introducing literacy and familiarity with an orthography from a young age
- help to maintain pride in an indigenous culture and to document linguistic traditions that are otherwise dependent upon oral-only intergenerational transmission

The Ao language

Spoken in the Mokokchung District of Nagaland, NE India by approximately 232,000 people (Census of India 2001).

Two major dialects: Chungli and Mongsen

- Chungli is the prestige language by virtue of it being a written language
- Mongsen is an unwritten language spoken by ca. 40% of the Ao population.



Why develop another orthography?

5 good reasons:

1. Chungli phonology is substantially divergent (e.g. it lacks VOT contrasts in the plosive and affricate series).
2. The pre-phoneme 19th C. Chungli orthography has a number of many-to-one relationships between symbols and phonemes.
3. The Chungli orthography does not mark tone.
4. As an unwritten language, Mongsen is potentially more susceptible to endangerment.
5. A substantial percentage of the Ao population are disadvantaged by not being able to study in their mother tongue.

Mongsen Phonology

The dialect is not standardized, so every variety has its phonological shibboleths that distinguish a speaker's village of origin

- 2-way VOT contrast in stops, affricates
- some varieties have a voiceless sonorant series
- simple vowel phoneme inventories of 5-6 vowels
- 3 tones, plus distinctive intonation patterns

Consonant phoneme inventory

	BILABIAL	DENTAL	POST- ALV.	PALATAL/ PAL-ALV.	VELAR	GLOTTAL
Plosive	p p ^h	t t ^h			k k ^h	ʔ
Affricate		ts ts ^h		tʃ tʃ ^h		
Fricative		z s				h
Nasal	m (hm)	n (hn)			ŋ (hŋ)	
Lateral		l (hl)				
Approx	w (hw)		ɹ (hɹ)	j (hj)		

Vowel phoneme inventory

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u [u~o]*
Mid		ə	
Low		a a~**	

* allophones in free variation

** creaky voice is extremely rare, but contrastive

Proposed orthography - consonants

	BILABIAL	DENTAL	POST- ALV.	PALATAL/ PAL-ALV.	VELAR	GLOTTAL
Plosive	p ph	t th			k kh	h
Affricate		ts tsh		j ch		
Fricative		z s				h
Nasal	m	n			ng	
Lateral		l				
Approx	w		r	y		

Orthography issues and justifications: consonants

- the orthography is close to the English and existing Chungli orthographies, so it is intuitive for speakers
- p~ph, t~th, k~kh etc. intentionally avoids using voiced symbols, thereby reinforcing the fact that there are no voiced stops or affricates in Ao, unlike in English.
- speakers stumbled over pronunciation of <c> (i.e. /tʃ/) in tests of readability, so <j> was determined to be a better choice.
- the glottal approximant <h> only occurs word-initially and word internally, so there is no ambiguity with the glottal stop <ʔ>, which only occurs word-finally.

Proposed orthography - vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		o
Mid		ü	
Low		a	

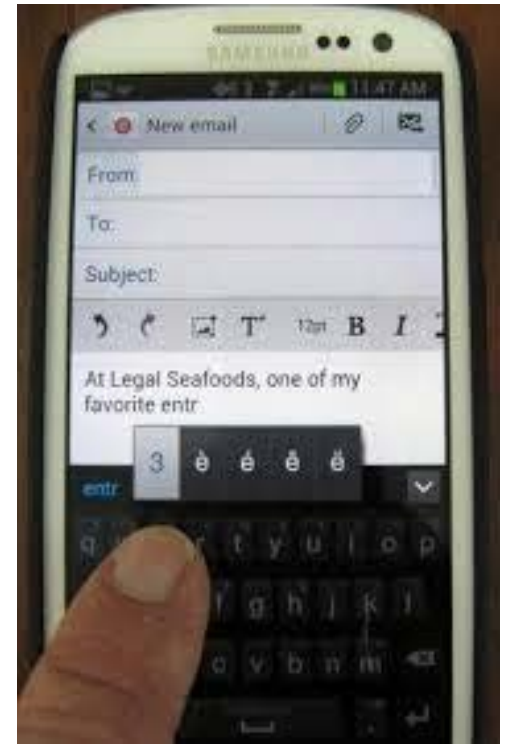
Tones high: σ́
mid: σ
low: σ̀

Orthography issues and justifications: vowels

- The Ao community has a strong attachment to <ü>, which is commonly used for schwa in the “Naga” languages. The problem is that the diacritics are difficult to type, so they often get left off.
- This potentially creates ambiguity between the orthographic representation of /u/ and /ə/. As [u] and [o] occur as allophones of /u/, the solution is to represent the high back rounded vowel with <o>, and schwa with <ü> (or <u> if the diacritics are not used).
- Creaky voice has such a light functional load that it does not warrant unique orthographic representation.

Orthography issues and justifications: tones

- Using diacritics to mark tonal contrasts will decrease ambiguity due to homophony and increase reading speed
- Accents are now easily typed on smart phones by holding down a key and selecting the correct diacritic+ vowel combination, so it is not an issue for sms
- The orthography will serve to help standardize spellings with the tones marked.



Community issues with a new Mongsen script

- Possible resistance from the Chungli community, who may see a new Mongsen script as a threat.
- A new Mongsen script could split the community along the dialect cleavage.
- Response from the Ao Literature Board chairman less than encouraging – fears a backlash from his community.

But

- Not representing Mongsen orthographically will hasten its demise - all TB languages of Nagaland are listed by UNESCO as vulnerable.

What is the linguist's ethical responsibility?

From narratives to illustrated books



Experimental drawing workshop for 9-14 year-old orphans in Dimapur, Nagaland



Text takes privileged status over Drawing

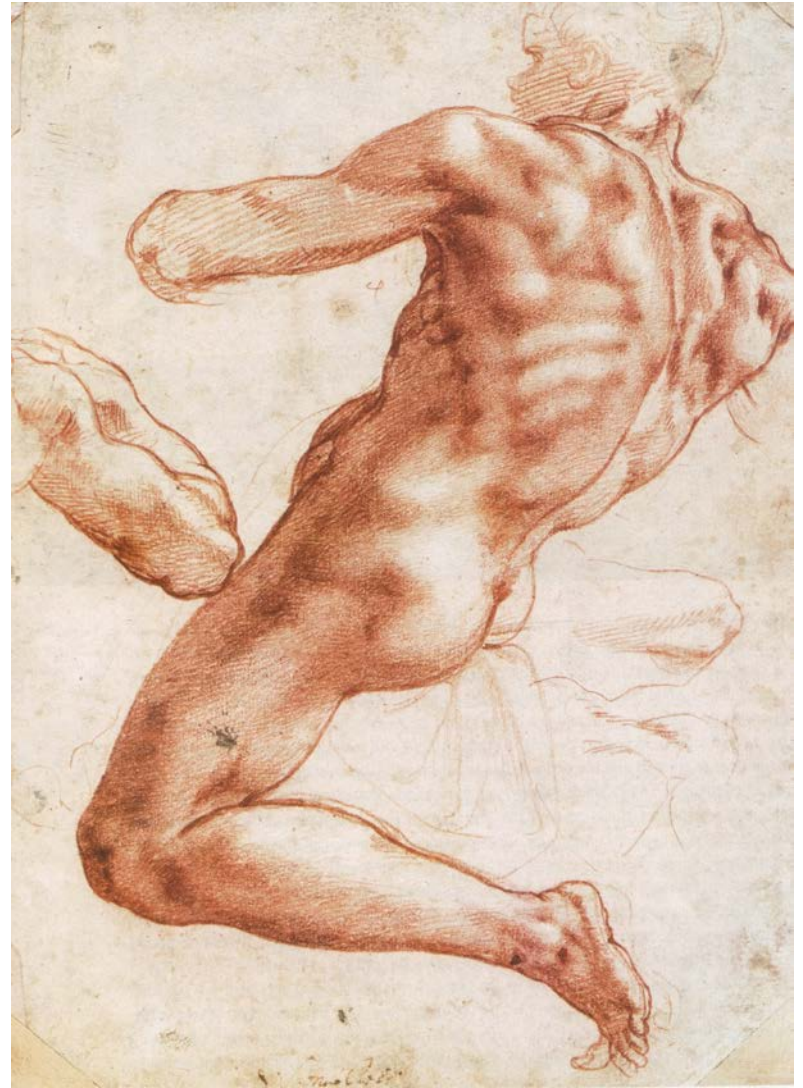
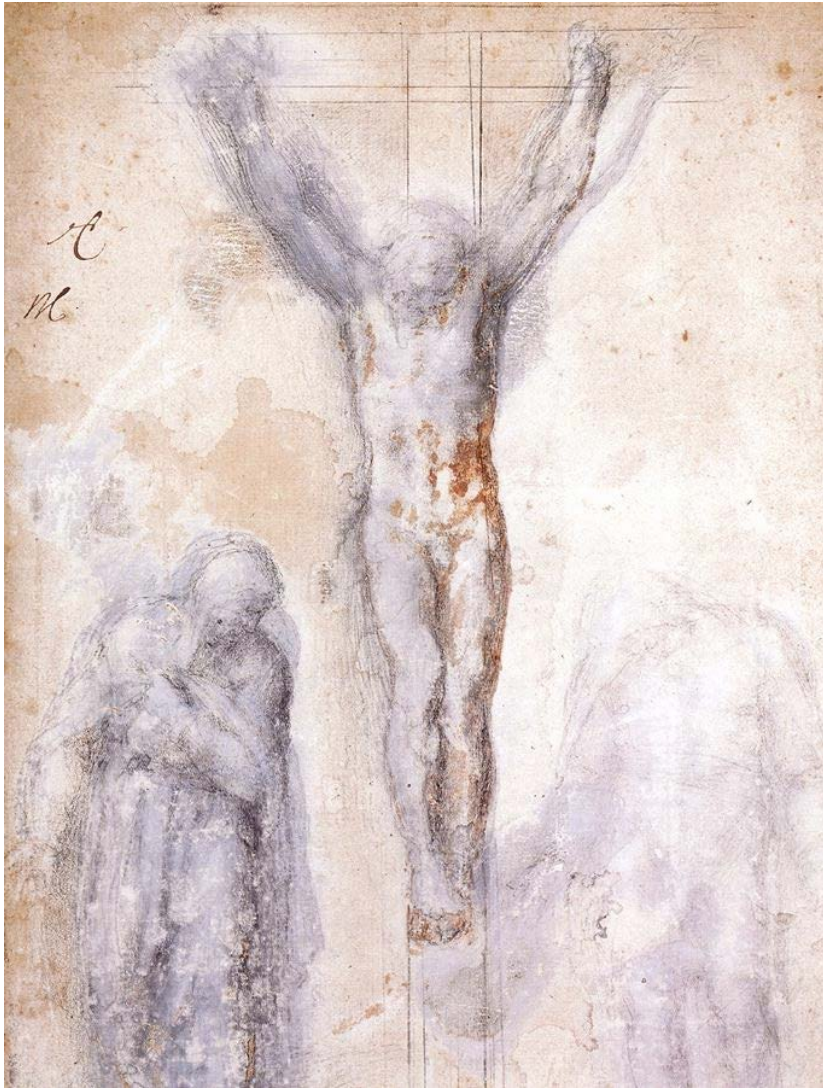
- Unscientific/ Subjective

What Meaning and Information is Unique to drawing?

- Speech-sound: no formal similarity to word
- Drawing may have direct resemblance to what it signifies
- Drawing renders thought visible

LINES: Seem to be part of the observable world—LINES DO NOT EXIST

- Lines represent convention
- Lines are organized into coded systems to approximate spatial & descriptive aspects
- Gestural lines carry in them the imprint of the bodies that make them
- Actions carried out in time



Two drawings by Michelangelo: the subject is the male figure, but the meaning lies far more deeply implicit in how the subject is developed. There is a direct connection between the meaning of the drawing and the methods the maker uses.



The nature of fieldwork is such that one can not predict what the outcomes will be. This image and those of the next two slides are drawings made by young Naga girls age 9-14. These are self-portraits of how they see themselves in ten years.

Note they have all drawn themselves as professional Caucasian women.



Art by Hale

Class - 3C

School - Don Bosco Jr. Sec. B.



The Tiger & The Rabbit

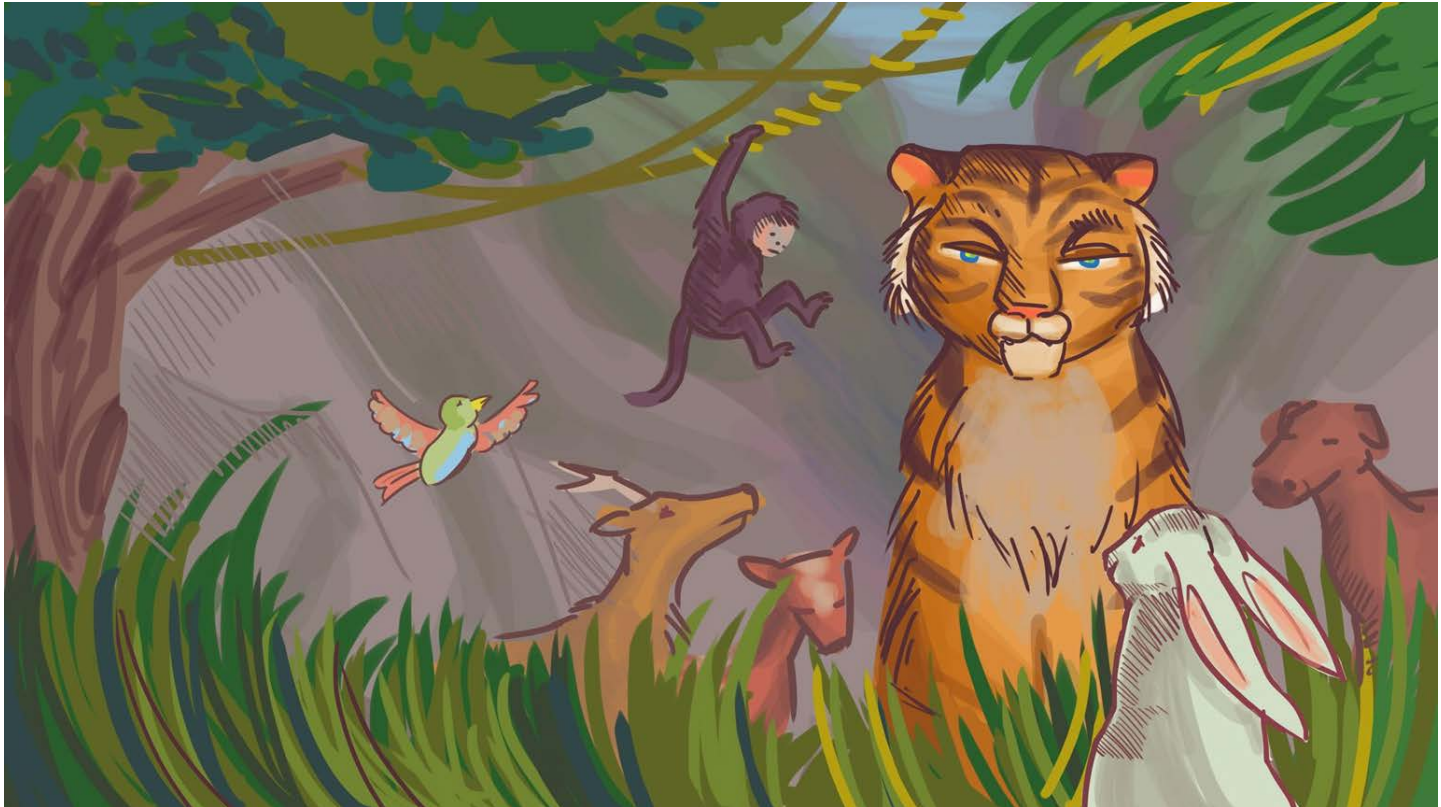


The Tiger & The Rabbit

“A proud king can
come to grief in front
of a meek individual.”



Visual Development



- Initially realistic in style

The Influence of *Wayang Kulit*

- rich form of storytelling in Indonesia
- visually beautiful and interesting
- decision turned out prudent



The Influence of *Wayang Kulit*

- silhouettes made characters recognizable
- challenge in working in two-dimensional space



The Influence of *Wayang Kulit*

“Every day an animal would come and the tiger would eat it, until many of them came to be eaten up.”

- how should potentially disturbing content be depicted in a story meant for children?



Page Design



Decorative borders create atmosphere and frame text.

Typeface Selection

**“Àit! Nì then
tèpètìpah lir pà?”**

(“What? Is there one bigger than me?”)

Typefaces that displayed diacritic marks had to be chosen.
Georgia was selected.

Key points

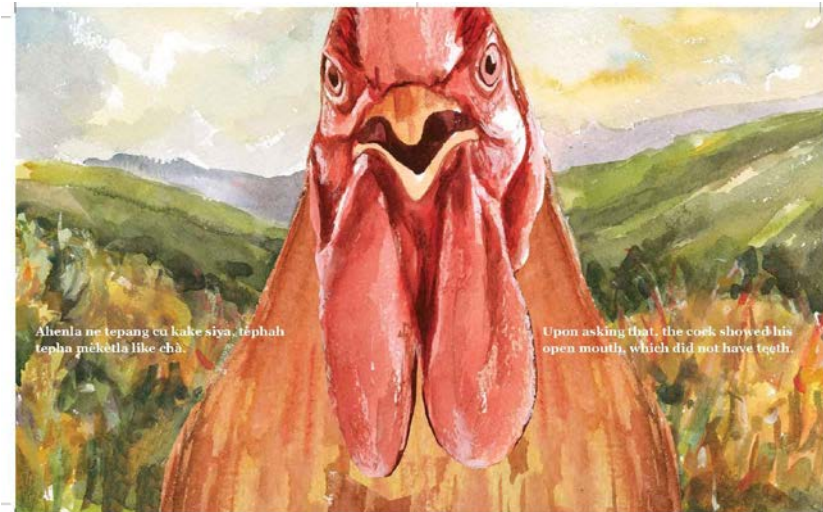
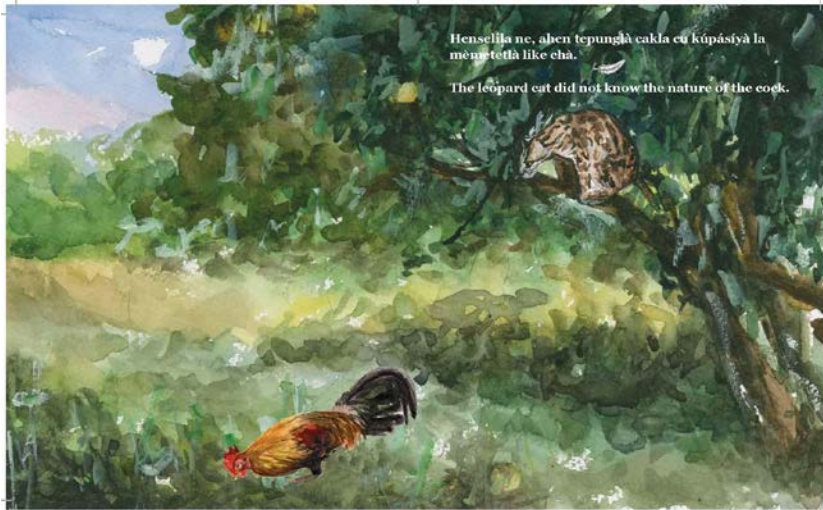
- Adapting visual storytelling styles across cultures
- Keeping the target audience in mind
- Technical design aspects
- Selecting the right typeface

Lesley Tang
www.lesleytang.com
lesley.L.tang@gmail.com

Why Does the Leopard Cat Eat Chickens?



Why Does the Leopard Cat Eat Chickens?



Interactive 3D Pop-up Book



[And so the cock, who was resplendently attired in beautiful colours, yodelled and danced with his beak wide open.]

Interactive 3D Pop-up Book



[Upon asking that, the cock showed his open mouth, which did not have teeth.]

Interactive 3D Pop-up Book



[Saying "Since You don't have teeth", the leopard cat pounced on the cock, and at that time the cock's life ended.]

Artists Influence

Green-Green



Yellow-Green



Blue-Green



The Blue Boat 1892

Winslow Homer

- Use of different shades of green



Passing Clouds 1876

George Inness

- dramatic atmospheric compositions

Cycle of A Day



Blue-Green



Dawn



Yellow-Green



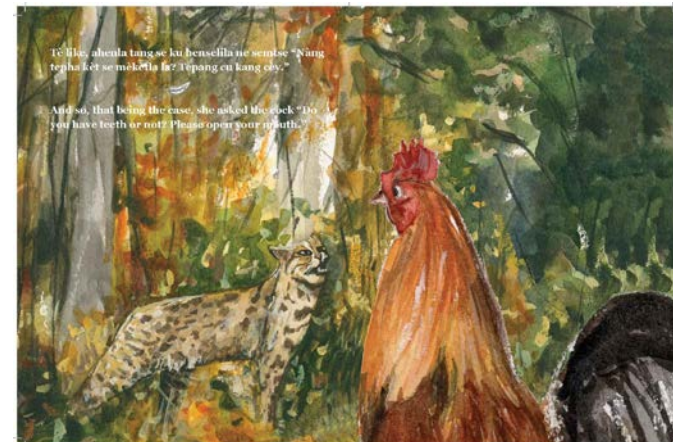
Noon



Green-Green



Morning



Yellow-Green



Blue-Green

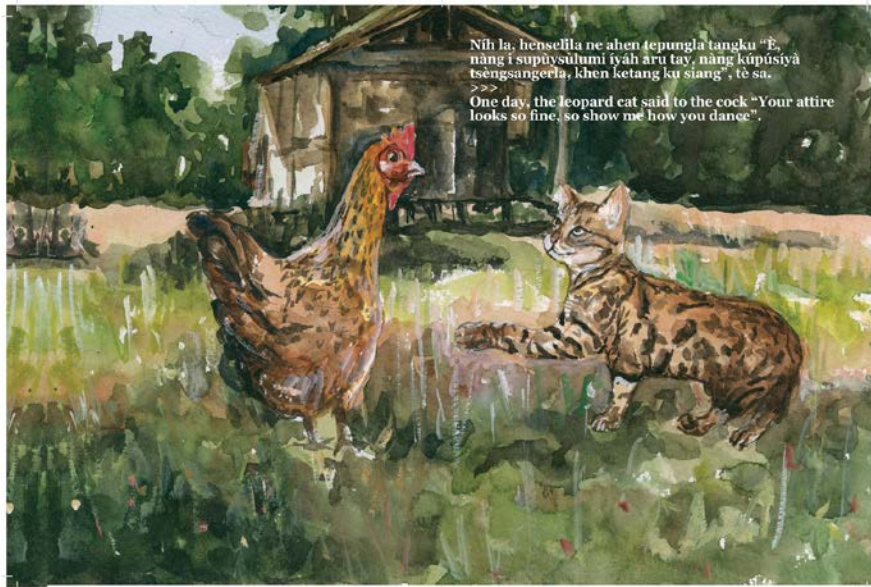


Green-Green

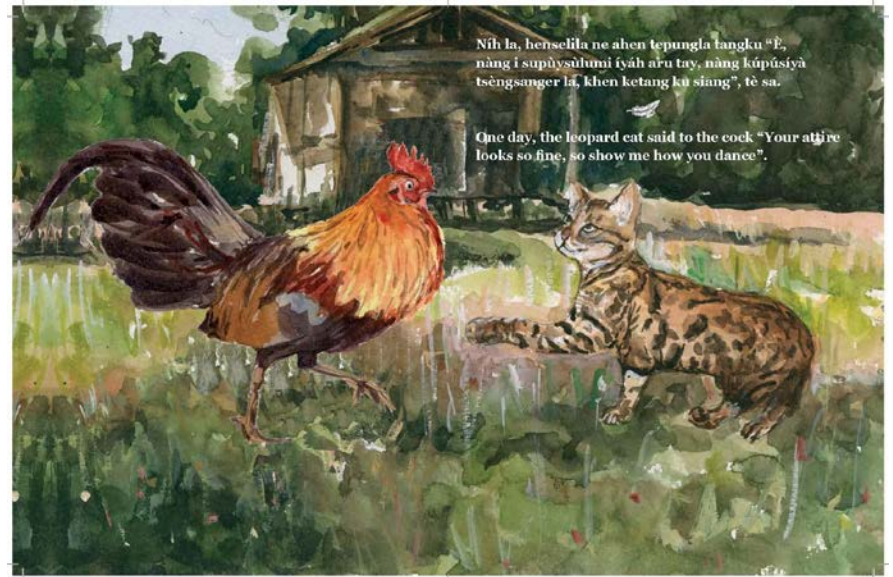


Sunset

Initial Mistake



Before: Random Hen



After: Red Jungle Fowl

Singapore Student's Experience with the Storybook



Singapore Student's Experience with the Storybook





Contact:

Peh Yang Yu

Tel: +65 91157940

Email: pehyangyu@hotmail.com

Conclusion

- Linguists and artists can successfully collaborate to produce materials of lasting value to minority communities
- Bilingual story books introduce and develop literacy skills in two languages
- Working in folklore helps to maintain oral cultural traditions

Thank you!